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C O N F I D E N T I A L TEGUCIGALPA 001141

SIPDIS

STATE FOR WHA/CEN, DRL/PHD, INL/LP, INR, CA, AND DS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/17/2014

TAGS: PHUM PGOV SNAR KCRM KJUS CASC ASEC HO

SUBJECT: SAN PEDRO SULA PRISON FIRE KILLS 103 INMATES;  
SECOND DEADLY PRISON FIRE IN LITTLE OVER A YEAR

REF: A. 03 TEGUCIGALPA 1742

B. 03 TEGUCIGALPA 861

C. 03 TEGUCIGALPA 1309

Classified By: DCM Roger D. Pierce; Reasons 1.5 (b) and (d).

1. (U) A fire allegedly caused by an electrical short circuit in a refrigerator for soft drinks in a cell block for gang members killed 103 inmates in a prison on the outskirts of San Pedro Sula. Approximately 25 injured prisoners were treated at a nearby hospital. (Two other injured prisoners died at the hospital.) The vast majority of the victims were members of the gang "Mara Salvatrucha," AKA "13." The incident caused President Ricardo Maduro to cut short his trip to Europe and announce he plans to return to Honduras.

2. (U) The prison, reportedly built to hold 800 prisoners, housed approximately 1,960 prisoners at the time of the fire according to the GOH. San Pedro Sula is Honduras' second largest city and economic capital, but is plagued by gang violence and an extremely high murder rate.

3. (SBU) Police are speculating that Mara Salvatrucha's rival, the "M-18 (diez y ocho)" gang, may have deliberately set the fire. Others are sure to soon blame the GOH for the fire given what happened in April 2003 at the El Porvenir prison near La Ceiba. While at least one inmate claimed that prison guards shot at prisoners, prison authorities said that the only shots fired were into the air to prevent a mass escape. Currently, there is no evidence that any of the victims were shot.

4. (U) Note: On April 5, 2003, 68 persons, 61 of them gang members, were killed in a violent incident at El Porvenir prison near La Ceiba. Reports produced by the Public Ministry, a Special Commission of the Honduran National Council for Internal Security (CONASIN), and the Human Rights Commissioner placed the blame for the vast majority of the deaths on government security forces (police and military under police command) and non-gang member inmate trustees. (See refs A-C for background and septel for an update.) End Note.

5. (U) There are two American citizen prisoners at the prison, but the Embassy's Consular Agent in San Pedro Sula has confirmed that neither was injured in the fire.

6. (U) Minister of Public Security Oscar Alvarez told Embassy Law Enforcement Advisor that the GOH would thoroughly investigate the incident. EmbOff offered the assistance of a law enforcement consultant currently working with the Police Internal Affairs Unit if needed.

7. (C) Comment: Especially given the April 2003 incident at the El Porvenir prison, there are likely to be allegations that the GOH is either (a) responsible for setting the fire, (b) negligent in letting a fire be started, and/or (c) negligent for allegedly not assisting the inmates in their burning cell block immediately. However, as noted above, it is quite possible that gang rivalries could have led to this incident. Violence between gang members (both inside and outside the prisons) is common. Past violent incidents have occurred at this San Pedro Sula prison, including grenades thrown over the prison walls. The San Pedro Sula prison has less controls than the main Tamara prison outside of Tegucigalpa. Post will closely follow the investigation of this incident and urge the GOH to conduct a complete and transparent investigation. End Comment.  
Palmer